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Battle Lines Keep Shifting Over Foreign Military Training

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Seven Indonesian military officers who came to the United States last year to learn firsthand about democracy wound up in the middle of a classic Washington turf battle and the continuing debate over foreign military training. The seven had been invited under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, a Pentagon/State Department enterprise that trains foreign officers at U.S. war colleges. Because of Indonesia's poor human rights record, the men had been limited to non-combat courses that try to instill democratic norms, such as those on civil-military relations in the United States. The soldiers ended up in limbo, however, when, in the midst of their training in California last September, President Clinton cut off military-to-military contacts with Indonesia to protest anti-separatist violence in the province of East Timor. (1999 CQ Weekly, p. 2326)

Two months later, once Indonesia had elected a new president, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen sought to renew the training for the Indonesian officers. His decision was supported by Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska. However, Nancy Pelosi of California, ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Operations Appropriations Committee and a critic of military training for Indonesia, objected. She won the support of Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, whose department was paying for the Indonesians' particular training. Albright decided the soldiers should be sent home. Cohen, in turn, balked. Concerned about undermining long-term relations with the Indonesian military, he offered to pay for their training out of his own budget -- an unprecedented step. Stevens backed him and the Indonesians remained to finish their course.

Because it deals heavily with military forces in developing countries, some with a history of repression, the IMET program has drawn attention and debate out of all proportion to its $50 million annual budget, roughly the cost of one F-15 jet fighter. Fiercely defended and opposed, the program has undergone little objective review or analysis in the 24 years since it was launched to help counter Soviet influence during the height of the Cold War. Evidence for and against the program is largely anecdotal and subject to broad claims and knee-jerk accusations. Trying to get a better handle on the program, lawmakers inserted a provision in the fiscal 2000 foreign operations appropriations bill, part of the omnibus appropriations law (PL 106-113), requiring the secretaries of Defense and State to report to Congress by March 1 on the nature, cost and purpose of all U.S. military training programs around the world, including IMET. Some aides and outside groups found the first such report, issued last year, lacking in necessary details.

The House last year voted to cut off the foreign aid portion of funding for the Army's School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga. Only when Stevens and the Pentagon threatened to shift all appropriations for the school to the Defense budget did House leaders drop their plan. (1999 CQ Weekly, p. 2243) The school, which trains Latin American officers, has been criticized because its graduates include some of the most notorious violators of human rights in Central and South America. House Foreign Operations Appropriations Committee Chairman Sonny Callahan, R-Ala., said he gave in to the Senate demands because otherwise, "it would have been a loss of jurisdiction by this committee over [foreign military training] programs. In order to have standards for [the programs], it is better to have it here than in the defense subcommittee."

As foreign aid spending has contracted over the past decade, the White House has turned to military training as a foreign policy tool, according to a 1995 report from the Institute for National Strategic Studies, the military's premier think tank. "As U.S. foreign aid continues to collapse under strong congressional pressure to economize, this 'bonsai appropriation' in the vast forest of security assistance programs has gained in standing, potency and importance to national security far surpassing that envisioned by its political framers in 1976," the report said.

Policy Weapon--
The vast majority of foreign military training in the United States is in connection with foreign military sales -- training pilots, gunners and drivers in new hardware. U.S. forces also train extensively with friendly militaries. (Programs, p. 195) IMET, designed primarily for developing countries, has trained over 100,000 foreign officers. This year alone, more than 8,000 will graduate from U.S. military schools, most taking the same kind of courses U.S. officers need to take to advance up the ranks. As the strategic studies institute indicated, IMET is one of the few foreign aid programs that has actually received more money in recent years -- although its appropriation is still below its Cold War high point. Funding for IMET reached a peak in fiscal 1987 -- $56 million for 105 countries. It dropped to a low of $21.25 million for fiscal 1994, but has since rebounded to $50 million for each of the past two years. With foreign aid scarce, the program has become a juicy target for lawmakers or the State Department who want to stop or start a training program to signal satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a particular regime -- a tactic that has strained relations with the Defense Department.

The strategic studies institute report said, "State's ambivalence toward IMET is reflected in the department's propensity to use this grant program in short-range 'carrot and stick diplomacy.' The Defense [Department's] educational experience has not been viewed in the same light as equivalent civilian programs run by USIA [the U.S. Information Agency] and USAID [the Agency for International Development]; their programs are not curtailed, suspended or conditioned to signal U.S. displeasure with the government. "IMET is treated as an expendable program," the report complained. Military leaders "have little confidence in State's willingness to engage Congress heartily to increase funding levels for IMET or to defend individual country programs when scrutinized." A senior State Department official defended his department's actions, saying that "cutting off IMET should be seen as a serious step, not one we use in every situation." But the official added, "Where something has happened in a country antithetical to our values, we look for ways of exercising disproportionate leverage, and IMET is one of them."

Relying on Relations--
Pentagon officials and their supporters in Congress say the program should be seen as a long-term way for the military to develop contacts, not as a short-term foreign policy instrument. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner, R-Va., said in a recent interview, "These are programs that return great benefits to the United States when they [officers] return to their countries and take up positions of responsibility." Field officers have come to much the same conclusion, according to the 1995 Pentagon report. Most recognized that the program could only affect institutions in other countries at the margins. "Practitioners speak instead of access, rapport and ease of communications, terms used by some synonymously with 'influence,'" the report said.

Rear Adm. Craig Quigley, a Pentagon spokesman, told reporters at a Sept. 15 briefing on events in Indonesia that with the IMET program, "the whole purpose is engagement. You are either involved in a dialogue with the militaries of other nations or you're not. . . . Human beings react well to faces that they have seen before, people with whom they have had a conversation before. The old cliche about an emergency or a crisis is not the best time to place that first phone call to a person with whom you've never had any relationship is absolutely true." Take Pakistan. When that country's military seized power in a coup in October, Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., placed much of the blame for the U.S. failure to forestall or manage the event on a shortage of military-to-military relations -- a shortage caused by restrictions put in place by Congress.

Brownback, chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, said that by cancelling U.S. military training for Pakistan's officers in the 1990s, as part of a broad effort to protest Pakistan's attempts to build a nuclear bomb, the United States had undermined its own efforts. Washington was left without contacts in Pakistan's military leadership when the country for the first time admitted testing a nuclear weapon and was close to war with neighboring India. "If these restrictions had not been in place," Brownback said at a subcommittee hearing, "our military leaders could easily have contacted them on a personal basis." Brownback urged that the program be restarted, an idea that drew strong support from the Clinton administration's witness that day, Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth. "Our best vehicle is the IMET program," Inderfurth said. "We've lost touch with a whole

generation of Pakistani military leaders." Yet only a few weeks before, Brownback had voiced no such regrets when he joined 16 other senators on the Foreign Relations Committee in approving legislation (S 1568) that would have cut off similar training programs for Indonesia's military officers. (1999 CQ Weekly, p. 2326)

That decision followed years of failed efforts by liberals such as Pelosi and Sen. Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, to end such training programs for Indonesia, arguing that the United States should not be associated with the country's repressive military. Supporters of the program had managed to maintain some aid, arguing that the United States needed IMET to influence Indonesia's military. With the Indonesian military rampaging through some areas of the country, the program was increasingly difficult to justify. Indeed, the lack of civilian control over the military was so strong that Richard C. Holbrooke, U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, on Jan. 14 warned military officers against a coup.

Storm Center--
The most bitter argument over foreign military training, and the only one to spill into the streets, centers on the School of the Americas. Opponents of the program -- they call it a "school for dictators" -- have held protests in Georgia and on the Capitol steps for years. The military considers the school useful for developing contacts, promoting democracy and aiding interoperability -- the ability of U.S. forces to work with other countries in military operations -- such as peacekeeping and anti-drug campaigns. Louis W. Goodman, dean of American University's School of International Service and an expert on civil-military relations, said the school's main purpose is military training, not human rights or democracy building. "It's an interoperability training school," Goodman said. "To think it's a human rights training program is absurd --
you're teaching people to fly helicopters." For critics such as Rep. Joe Moakley, that's the problem. Moakley, a liberal Democrat from Massachusetts, has been campaigning to close the school ever since he discovered that three of its graduates were implicated in the murders of four Catholic nuns in El Salvador in 1980. After he found other graduates involved in assassinations and human rights crimes, he concluded that there was a pattern. "Every time there's a heinous act, there's someone from the School of the Americas involved," Moakley said in a recent interview.

Over the past decade, Pentagon officials and their supporters on Capitol Hill have sought to counter this criticism by saying that the school was not responsible for the acts of a few graduates. "A small number of people got arrested for various crimes. Less than 1 percent of the graduates got into trouble," said Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., a member of the Intelligence Committee. School officials have repeatedly changed their curriculum to give greater emphasis to human rights concerns. The latest revision came in November, when Army Secretary Louis Caldera and his supporters felt enough political heat to propose changes and avoid a congressional fight. "We're trying to help our supporters support us," Caldera said. The changes range from such cosmetics as renaming the school the Center for Inter-American Security Cooperation to bringing in more civilian students and dropping some military courses. "We're going to recharter the School of the Americas," Caldera said. Moakley said he is still likely to urge an end to funds for the school again this year. "We don't know if this is cosmetic or for real," he said. At a deeper level, Moakley said he is skeptical of the idea that U.S. military officials can teach democracy and human rights to foreign soldiers. "I think we should be out of the business of training them," Moakley said. "You can't teach democracy at the end of a bayonet."

Sharing Experience--
Supporters of the school argue that the U.S. military has much to teach its foreign counterparts about civilian control of the military and more humane ways to wage wars. "Bringing people in and sharing our experience gives us a better chance to shape the culture than not doing it," said Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. And Kyl said, "Over the years, social scientists will tell you that we've had a positive influence through these
exchanges."

Speaking to reporters Jan. 26 on a visit to Washington, Colombian President Andres Pastrana said that having Colombian officers trained at U.S. military schools was essential in improving the country's human

rights record. "It is very important that the military can come to the United States and that courses are open to them," Pastrana said. (Pastrana, p. 198)

In testimony last year before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Eric D. Newsom, assistant secretary of State for political-military affairs, agreed. "I continue to see International Military Education and Training as the security assistance that gives America the biggest bang for the buck," Newsom said. "I believe, for the most part, we do not fully appreciate how IMET and similar programs impart American values to the recipients in foreign militaries, both directly and indirectly. The stability we saw in military forces around the world during [the] recent radical decrease in defense budgets would have resulted in coups which today never materialized, in part because of the learned respect for civilian control of the military."

In fact, though, scholars of civil-military relations say that there have been no serious academic studies investigating how these training programs affect graduates' behavior. "There is very little hard information of what is cause and what is effect," Goodman said. Thomas Carothers, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pointed out in his recently published book, "Aiding Democracy Abroad," that the military tends to justify the program based on a few selective positive anecdotes. "That does not mean that is useless for the U.S. military to include democracy and human rights in its training courses for foreign military personnel," Carothers concludes. "It means that its claims for the transformative effects of such efforts . . . must be greeted with considerable skepticism. As with all democracy-related assistance, training courses, no matter how well-designed and salutary, do not by themselves reshape entrenched, often badly flawed foreign institutions."

By the same token, however, opponents of these program rely on anecdotal evidence to buttress their own cases, in the absence of statistics. "People have to draw on anecdotal rather than quantitative measures," Caldera said. "They [opponents] cite some programs as a failure, we say it's overwhelmingly been a success."

Cautious Training--
The last time the program was overhauled, in 1990, Leahy took advantage of the end of the Cold War by forcing through the creation of a separate version of IMET for countries such as Indonesia, which were governed by military dictators and had troubled human rights records but with which the U.S. wanted to maintain military ties. Timothy S. Rieser, Leahy's chief aide on the Foreign Operations panel, said that the history of the past decade shows "that as an approach, 'expanded IMET' makes a lot of sense," by continuing military-to-military ties without providing combat training to questionable regimes. But Rieser said that not enough resources were being devoted to the program, compared with the more traditional IMET programs funded by the Pentagon. And the proportion of civilian officials taking part in the modified version of IMET was still not high, he said. "On the whole there's been a lot of progress," Rieser said. "But I still don't think we're there yet."